The forensic art of LAWRENCE ABU HAMDAN
by Ben Mauk

Does sound deceive?

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The barn owl tracks its prey acoustically and can hunt in total darkness. It’s one of those facts to which we ascribe poetic as well as mythic permanence: not only Lilith and Athena but Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s large white owl that with eye is blind. Yet, we arrived at this knowledge — by which I mean this scientific knowledge — only recently. In the 1970s, infrared photography captured a barn owl flying through the path of a lightless research room and at the threshold of contact with a mouse. The resulting multiple exposures were revealing: the owl spreads its talons, lowers its heart-shaped head and closes its eyes, its body eerily imbricated with past and future selves like a host of white angels descending. The pictures are the work of neuroscientist Masakazu Komishi, whose experiments in darkened anechoic chambers established our knowledge of a fast fact assumed: the owl does not need to see the mouse it hunts. The rustling noises of the prey contain all the information needed for the owl to locate it in space, he wrote.

Komishi also tested the barn owl’s hearing against that of his undergraduate students. Finding that, above 12 kilohertz, the human ear is more sensitive than the most sensitive bird’s. Yet, pair of ears can define a point in three dimensions. In this and many other respects, noise is demandingly vague. The owl makes its educated guess. We do the same, locating the origins of sounds by attending to the inequality between the sound waves each ear perceives. But there is guesswork. Any given inequality corresponds to not one but a family of points in space. We rely on an array of fallible assumptions, beliefs and prejudices — a kind of acoustic shorthand — to resolve this constellation of possible objects or speakers into a single, well-ordered reality.

Lawrence Abu Hamdan is an artist-investigator of our acoustic shorthand. His video and audio installations trace a path from hearing’s biological origins to the legal and technological appendages it has lately acquired: a century of aural mutations of which the owl dares not to dream. As a forensic audio analyst, who sometimes collaborates with the human-rights research agency Forensic Architecture, Abu Hamdan has become a Komishi for the nation-state, a southerner whose work augurs the evolution of a new kind of hearing. He calls it ‘forensic listening’ and its subjects are manifold. A Palestinian in the UK pronounces the Arabic word for ‘tomato’ as a different shade of ‘benadoora’ instead of ‘benduora’; as a result, his application for asylum is rejected. A sheikh in Cairo risks his life to broadcast sermons that the sound-absorbing mufflers that shaped the sonic atmosphere of the gallery. They are voices riven from language, the purest expression of the new politics of listening.

Elsewhere, Abu Hamdan homes in on ambient rustlings we are not meant to hear. The Hummingbird Clock (2016), a work combining sculpture and a website, takes as itsmedium the background hum of the UK’s electrical grid, which is omnipresent and imperceptible. For more than a decade, London’s Metropolitan Police has relied on the micro-variations in this hum to verify whether recorded conversations submitted as evidence in criminal investigations have been edited and to pinpoint the exact time of their occurrence, since every ten-second section of any recording made in the UK contains auzzing fingerprint. Abu Hamdan democratizes this little-known method of surveillance by making it publicly available online, inviting anyone to submit videos for time-stamping. The website augments the sculptural component of the piece, whose was commissioned for the 2016 Liverpool Biennial: a cluster of outdoor binoculars pointed at the clock on the Town Hall, across from the Queen Elizabeth II law courts.

Abu Hamdan’s activities take freely from the traditions of investigative journalism, human-rights campaigns and conceptual art. Yet, unlike the investigative work for which his colleagues at Forensic Architecture are known, he is always moving towards an encounter that transcends the legal and extralegal injustices that form his raw material. His work begins in activism but ends elsewhere. In 2016, an Amnesty International team, which included Abu Hamdan, began interviewing prisoners who had been released from Saydnaya — a Syrian military prison north of Damascus. He has since produced a series of ambitious videos, installations, performances and texts based on the concept of ‘acoustic leakage’ at the prison, which remains an unknown entity to international observers. The prisoners at Saydnaya are blindfolded except when confined to their cells but have managed to reconstruct the prison’s layout and its methods of subjugation through aural remembrance. ‘We know the cell tile by tile, so well that

The Freedom of Speech Itself

Two early projects, The Freedom of Speech Itself and Conflicted Phonemes (both 2012), used documentary video, infographics and sculpture to interrogate the accent-analysis techniques employed by private government contractors to vet the authenticity of asylum seekers’ origin stories. These ‘refugee detectives’ began to appear in northern Europe in the early 2000s, ordering asylum seekers to speak into their recording machine, then hiring other immigrants to detect falsehoods inside their phonemes. The system is perfectly legal. As any linguist will tell you, accents are not stable markers of origin or identity. Nor are consultants always familiar with the accents they have been hired to interpret. Conflicted Phonemes consists of a series of colourful infographics describing this capricious legal reckoning, using the cases of 12 Somali asylum seekers whose applications in the Netherlands were rejected because they failed to utter certain shibboleths. For the sound-installation iteration of The Freedom of Speech Itself — shown at Kunsthall Extra City, Antwerp, in 2014 and HKW, Berlin, in 2015 — the artist used topographical foam sculptures that sound-absorbing mufflers that shaped the sonic atmosphere of the gallery. They are voices riven from language, the purest expression of the new politics of listening.

Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s new exhibition at Maureen Paley, London, converses with this and many other of Abu Hamdan’s works. It opens on 7 July with a series of panels and exhibitions and runs through to 8 September.
The ear is often permitted to witness what the eye, whose power is recognized, cannot.